

Notwithstanding the minor limitations, *Rogue Empires* is a rich treatise of 371 pages taking the reader on Press's own journey garnering a deep understanding of how Africa came to be so impacted by Europeans in the aforesaid scramble for land, other natural resources, and sadly slaves.

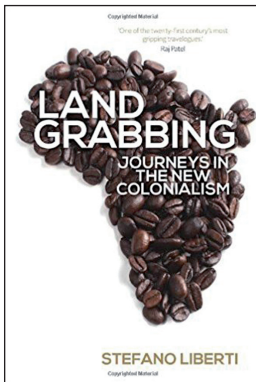
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LAND GRABBING: JOURNEYS IN THE NEW COLONIALISM, by Stefano Liberti. London, New York: Verso, 2013; ISBN: 13-978-178168-117- 6 (hard back), i-xii + 226 pp.



So much has been written on land grabbing that it is difficult to find anything new in books on the subject. Titles such as Fred Pearce's, *The Land Grabbers: The New Fight Over Who Owns the Earth* (2012), *Handbook of Land and Water Grabs in Africa: Foreign Direct Investment and Food and Water Security* by Tony Allan, Martin Keulertz, Suvi Sojamo, and Jeroen Warner and *The Great African Land Grab?* (2013) by Lorenzo Cotula sound so comprehensive that they might easily be taken to represent finality on the topic.

It is within this context that Stefano Liberti's *Land Grabbing: Journeys in the New Colonialism* was written. The cover photo of the book is an African map, so the impression is that the book is about Africa. In fact, its coverage is much wider with chapters about Brazil, Switzerland, USA, and Saudi Arabia along with Ethiopia and Tanzania. The cover photo, then, echoes the story in the book: Africa may be the source of the most vibrant land grab processes, but the story does not begin and end in Africa. Indeed, land grabbing as ideology, process, and practice has roots and branches all over the world.

The book's central claim to originality is its approach. Unlike most books on land grabbing cast in the area where land is taken *per se*, in this book the author retraces the trail of the land grabbers to interview them wherever they may be: In Europe, South America, USA, and the Middle East. He goes to where the land grabbers relax and meet. He follows them to the UN offices, the New York Stock Exchange, and academic conferences. He combines insights from diverse meetings with actual field experiences in Tanzania, Brazil, and Ethiopia. So, in determining whether much of the land grabbing is speculative, he actually goes to the NYSE, to see what they do – unlike the World Bank economists which dismisses the speculative concern on the basis of detached computer programming and ideological precommitment to econometrics without economic analysis.

This approach generates insights that advance our knowledge of the diagnosis, prognosis and consequences of land grabbing. Revelation upon revelation are spread over six detached chapters that are so rich that summarising them is impossible. So, I only highlight a few key findings that advance the debates. Chapter 1 develops the reasons why host countries sell their land. 'Development' is often the declared reason in the existing literature but the book highlights the need for foreign exchange – or what one state official called 'money in strong currency' (p. 16) – as a major driving reason for land grabbing. In turn, much of the sale is done in strong currency rather than local currencies. Even more fundamentally, many host nations are facilitating land grabbing because of their own survival, that is, they survive because they serve the needs of powerful nations which need African land and they, in turn, offer protection to the land grabbing-endorsing regimes. Chapter 2 reveals that the competition to get this strong currency, however, leads to some ridiculously low land prices. For example, in Mozambique, the price for 1 hectare of land is \$1, in Ethiopia it is 50-70 cents and, in Central African Republic, land is free for the first investors to arrive.

This criminal land pricing is strongly encouraged by the world development agencies, including the World Bank and the FAO. But why not? In Chapter 3, we obtain detailed analysis of how the World Bank's IFC is itself a land investor (p.101). So, as the book shows in chapter 4, when these organisations – especially the World Bank – turn around to devise the so-called *Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment* jointly developed by FAO, IFAD, UNCTAD and the World Bank Group- without grassroots input, what they are doing, in fact, is to create a market for themselves. This self-interest or conflict of interest is never declared except perhaps in the investment community in which the World Bank is seen as a big investor and so its investment practices signal what other investors should do. In this sense, the *World Development Reports* are essentially investment prospectuses for the world of investors and smaller reports such as *Rising Global Interest in Farmland* (World Bank, 2011) are designed to manipulate markets. Thus, when the World Bank researchers claim – in their contribution to *The World Bank Economic Review* (Arezki et al.,

2015) - that it is not speculation that is driving the hikes in land prices, it is making a self-interested statement couched in 'scientific' econometrics.

Instead, as Liberti shows, by directly observing and interviewing investors, land grabbing is largely speculative. A business for TNCs, the land grabbing model collides with small scale farmers. For Liberti, therefore, there is no win-win land grabbing. What land grabbing does is to transfer land – indeed wealth and rent - from the poor to the rich. Chapter 5 is cast in Brazil where a careful assessment of the case for and against land grabs show that the pro-case (developmental benefits) is considerably weaker than the against case (how land grabs increase food prices, making them unaffordable and the social inequalities that land grabs create). Only few TNCs and powerful nations control vast expanses of land (see pp. 147-148). So, the persistence of modern day *latifundia* is real. As with the past, this agrarian capitalism has generated heated and well-co-ordinated challenge. In short, as Stefano notes:

I come to the conclusion that the situation in Brazil prefigures what is happening and will happen increasingly often throughout the world over the coming years. Having an enormous concentration of land ownership and having experienced an extraordinary level of penetration by agrofuel multinationals, Brazil has been a hotbed for movements demanding agrarian reform and a flashpoint for conflict over land. Such conflicts are bound to be extended globally, and to lead to increasingly fraught clashes between the representatives of small farmers and those of big business. The result of these clashes will almost certainly determine the kind of planet we will be living on over the course of the twenty-first century. (p. 167).

If Liberti left Brazil upbeat about spirited activism to overturn colonial and colonising TNC activities, that optimism disappears in chapter 6, the last chapter, which is cast in Tanzania. Although similar processes of accumulation and displacement take place there, the levels of activism in Tanzania are hopelessly disappointing:

I saw no organised movements, social pressure or national solidarity. The small farmers seem resigned to their fate, having come up against a force much stronger than themselves.When I asked them 'what do you intend to do?' 'Nothing, what can we do?' they answered. The idea of organising protests in the capital, contacting lawyers, or fighting for their rights hadn't seemed to cross their minds...They know that they have been tricked...but they see these injustices as a travesty that cannot be fixed. (p.193)

Where Liberti trips - and does so badly - is when he proceeds on this finding to generalise:

This is perhaps the clearest illustration of the enormous gap that exists between two worlds that are so distant and yet now so geographically near: the peasant, unaware that his land has now become a commodity, and the investor sitting in his office in Washington DC, thinking that it might be better to invest in jatropha than dot.com enterprises (pp. 193-194).

How this Tanzanian case becomes the basis for concluding the entire book is not clear. Indeed, for this reviewer, this fatalistic conclusion is the most disappointing aspect of *Land Grabbing: Journeys in the New Colonialism*. Liberti seems to have lost

steam after all the global trotting and research, feebly concluding that it is all the fault of governments in the Third World, the lack of revolutionary spirit of people who lose their land, and frankly, nothing can be done about the system: that is how it is, and, perhaps, only education (enlightenment?) can address the problem.

This flight from materialism to idealism brings into sharp focus the weak analytical foundations of the book. As Liberti holds academics in contempt, preferring to search for experiential knowledge and chastising academics who spend too much time trying to frame social observations (see chapter 1, especially pp. 28-31), he appeals to no framework to organise his vast and rich body of findings, and does not systematically situate his findings within the body of research on land, claiming such work is not independent or does not exist (see, pp. 28-31). It is certainly a problem to simply theorise about a materialist issue such as land grabbing, but simply going round the world to look at different issues without a framework to organise one's thoughts can only lead to the pessimistic and runaway conclusions in chapter 6. Besides, the book does not seem to appreciate the various ways in which Africans, including Ethiopians and Tanzanians, have struggled and protested to bring about social change. Thankfully Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly's recent book - *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (2015) – corrects this ill-informed view that expropriated, exploited, and mistreated Africans are docile.

Still, if these issues are bracketed out, Liberti has done a great service to the research community. A journalist by profession, his approach is worthy of further development and the evidence he has collected and published now ready for further critical analysis. In short, *Land Grabbing: Journeys in the New Colonialism* is highly recommended.

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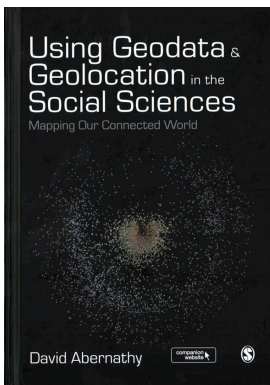
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GENERAL BOOKS

USING GEODATA AND GEOLOCATION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: MAPPING OUR CONNECTED WORLD, by David Abernathy. London: Sage, 2016.



“As our tools for collection and managing data have evolved, we have learned how to acquire, store and visualize vast amount of data. Yet we are only now beginning to understand how we might ask new questions of these data as we seek to better understand ourselves and the world around us” (p. 30).

It is hard to imagine that Eratosthenes, the Greek astronomer best known as the “father of Geography”, thought about “Big data”, “Geoweb”, “Mashups” or “Fusion tables”. Yet the fundamental desire of human beings to “think spatially” and understand how people and objects are organized in space have not changed much since Eratosthenes first used the term “Geographika” (or “writing Earth”) around 250 BC. Centuries later, the science of geography continues to evolve. New theories in mathematics and astronomy helped to improve the accuracy of maps, while new printing techniques and technology allowed reducing the cost of map production and distribution. But in the past few decades there is a big change in the way we organize, categorize and map Earth. The invention of computerized Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in the 1960s revolutionized how we collect, map and analyze spatial data and give meaning to the world around us. With advances in computer processing power and data storage, increased availability of personal computers, the invention of the internet (the World Wide Web) and the growing popularity of mobile and “smart” phones, the volume of data we generate and consume began to grow exponentially. In today’s “information age”, a vast amount of different types of data is being generated and stored faster than ever. Much of this data has a spatial component (“big geodata”) which is the focus of this book.

The book focuses on the concepts of geodata (i.e. data that has a spatial or locational component) and “geoweb” (which the author define as “a distributed digital network of geolocated nodes that capture, produce, and communicate data that include an explicitly spatial component”, p. 316). It provides a wide range of real-